

If, however, the proofs adduced before your committee shall conclusively establish that secret political councils have been organized among us for the purposes and designs attributed to them, I humbly conceive that there can be little or no diversity of opinion as to their tendency to subvert "the well established and dearly cherished principles of our government.

The Constitution degrades no man, either on account of his place of birth, or his religious opinions, but equally covers every citizen of the State, of whatever faith, or wheresoever born, with its protecting shield. And if it shall be made to appear that in such of these political councils as may be shown to exist, oaths or pledges are administered for the purpose of qualifying or restraining the exercise of the right of suffrage, in any manner unknown to, or unwarranted by the Constitution, it will be for you and those you represent, to determine how far such obligations shall be allowed to conflict with the constitutional obligations of the citizen to the State, and to apply the remedy which such a condition of things may require.

It might be well to consider that, while this matter is undergoing investigation, whether the existence of such a secret order may not have led in some instances to pre-determined obstruction of the polls, resulting in violence and disorder, and the exclusion of the legal votes of orderly and well disposed citizens; for it is one of the most imperative of the duties of the State to throw around electors of every class, whether native or adopted, any possible means of protection against any and all combinations, secret or open, that would hinder or overawe them in the exercise of their right of voting, and thus impede the free course of the only legitimate means of obtaining a fair expression of the public mind. A willful and deliberate obstruction of the polls is a crime against the State, which, in view of its consequences, assumes a degree of enormity to which it is difficult to affix a limit, and the Legislature can scarcely be too rigid in the infliction of punishment upon those who may be found guilty of such an offence against the dignity of the State and the right of the individual citizen. It should at least be declared a felony, and punished accordingly. I hope, whatever may be the result of your present investigation, that you commend such action to the favorable notice of the Legislature, in order that henceforth any hindrance or obstruction whatsoever, with intent to prevent a voter from depositing his ballot, shall be punished with due severity.

I have thus, sir, in the midst of unusual and constant interruptions, (not wishing to detain you from the work before you by any delay on my part, hastily thrown together these few suggestions in compliance with the request contained in your note, to which this is a reply. I might have forbore to do more than to reiterate here the language of my communication to the Legislature at the opening of the session, as containing all I desired to say in the premises; but in conformity with the wish expressed in your note and the accompanying resolutions of the House of Delegates, I thought it well to point out the way in which, in my opinion, the truth might be reached.

I have the honor to be, very respectfully, your ob'dt serv't,

T. WATKINS LIGON.